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Vanuatu police, aided by US Coast Guard, say Chinese vessels violated fishing laws

By Kirsty Needham

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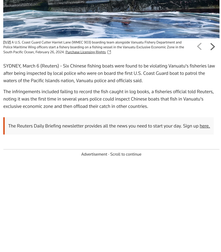

SUBJ U.S. Coast Guard Cutter Harriet Lane (WMEC 903) boarding team alongside Vanuatu Fishery Department and Police Maritime Wing officers start a fishery boarding on a fishing vessel in the Vanuatu Exclusive Economic Zone in the South Pacific Ocean, February 29, 2024. Purchase Licensing Rights

SYDNEY, March 6 (Reuters) - Six Chinese fishing boats were found to be violating Vanuatu's fisheries law after being inspected by local police who were on board the first U.S. Coast Guard boat to patrol the waters of the Pacific Islands nation, Vanuatu police and officials said.

The infringements included failing to record the fish caught in log books, a fisheries official told Reuters, noting it was the first time in several years police could inspect Chinese boats that fish in Vanuatu's exclusive economic zone and then offload their catch in other countries.

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One of the Chinese vessels that police said had breached the law is owned by Chinese state-owned company CNFC Overseas Fisheries, which has a joint venture with Vanuatu's government called Sino-Van, a Reuters review of ship registration details and company filings showed.

Yakar Silas, principal monitoring, control and surveillance officer with Vanuatu's Fisheries Department, said penalty notices would be sent to several Chinese companies and their local agents in Vanuatu.

Most violations were by Chinese fishing fleets that fished Vanuatu waters but were based overseas, he said.

"The patrol gave the opportunity to inspect foreign vessels that are fishing in Vanuatu waters and not coming into port and offloading their catch into foreign ports, for example Fiji," he added. "They are all Chinese vessels."

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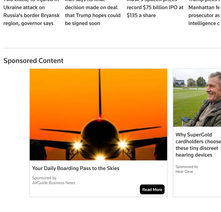
The Chinese embassy said the Chinese boats had fishing permits from the Vanuatu government and were fishing legally. "Chinese companies obey Vanuatu laws," an embassy spokesperson said in the email.

Sino-Van director Zhang Junwei said in an email to Reuters that Vanuatu's Prime Minister Charlot Salwai is "supportive of the Sino-Van project". The CNFC vessel depicted in U.S. Coast Guard photographs did not belong to the company's Vanuatu branch, he added.

The U.S. Coast Guard Cutter Harriet Lane patrolled Vanuatu waters for the first time last week. Last year, a Coast Guard vessel on patrol for illegal fishing was refused access to Vanuatu's port.

China is Vanuatu's largest external creditor, and Beijing and Washington are jostling for influence and security ties in the strategically important Pacific Islands region. Political instability in Vanuatu last year saw two prime ministers unseated in a matter of weeks.



A decade ago, CNFC formed a joint venture with Vanuatu's government, promising to open a local tuna cannery to bring greater revenue to the economy beyond the licence fees from foreign fleets that fish Vanuatu's exclusive economic zone.

The cannery has not opened, and Sino-Van only sells frozen fish to the local market, a company director said.

Salwai and China's ambassador Li Mingqiang visited Sino-Van on Feb. 27, the day after CNFC's boat was boarded by the U.S. Coast Guard and police on Feb. 26.

Sino-Van had created job opportunities for the people of Vanuatu people, the Chinese embassy said. "Vanuatu now has a larger variety of fish products. Local people's life has been improved," the embassy spokesperson added.

A U.S. Coast Guard spokeswoman confirmed the CNFC vessel, Zhong Shui 708, was among six Chinese vessels boarded by Vanuatu police who found infringements.

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"The Vanuatu government will be the determining agency on what will happen with the violations," the U.S. Coast Guard spokeswoman said.

Bianca Simeon, an inspector with the Vanuatu maritime police who boarded the fishing boats, said half of the boats inspected had violations. "They did not properly report the catch in their catch logs," she told Reuters.

Vanuatu police had not patrolled its EEZ for several years, she added.

Reporting by Kirsty Needham, Editing by Mica Fahmy

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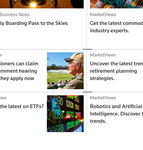

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